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"Venus Observed"

Journal-American

February 14, 1952

A Gratifying Evening In Anyone's Theatre

By JOHN McCLAIN

It must be stated at the outset that I am perhaps uncommonly biased in favor of the talents of Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer and that I find music, magic and mirth in the poetic dramas of Christopher Fry (even though I am sometimes at loss to know quite why)—so it comes as no surprise that I enjoyed immensely last night's Theatre Guild production of "Venus Observed."

There is vague imagery, there are moments of oblique speech with many people talking as no people ever talked, employing dozens of words not included in any dictionary the average person can lift, there is a bare wisp of a plot and several periods of unrelieved vacuum.

But these minor distractions are far outweighed by the arresting performances of the stars and the immaculate supporting cast, the soaring prose of Mr. Fry and the general artfulness of the staging and production. I call it an extremely gratifying evening in anybody's theatre.

* * *

Such Timing

One thing you have to hand Harrison: he never reads a line without the true sense of knowing what it means. It may not be immediately intelligible to the listener, who has not been privileged to scan it several times, but he delivers it with such timing and assurance that the general intent emerges.

To a degree the same can be said of Miss Palmer. She unwound one speech of 40-odd uninterrupted lines, involving at least five obscure adjectives one after another, and came very close to making sense. Her efforts were rewarded with a round of applause.

For all its symbolism and abstruse diction the plot of "Venus Observed" is disarmingly simple. Harrison, who plays the role of the Duke of Altair, is approaching 50 and feels that he should marry somebody to relieve the loneliness of his latter years.

Thus he summons three former mistresses to his home and tells his son, John Merivale, to make the choice for him. At this moment Lilli appears on the scene. She is an added starter, the daughter of his estate manager, and, of course, the Duke falls for her. And so does his son.

* * *

Tries to Kill Him

There is the moment when the Duke has Lilli alone in his private observatory ("Come up and see my stars, darling") and one of his ex-mistresses sets fire to the joint. They have a very tough time getting saved, after which Miss Palmer realizes she really loves the son and the Duke discovers that he ought to marry the mistress that touched off the blaze. She is the only one that cares enough about him to want to kill him.

If you want symbolism, again, I would say that it's all about Autumn, Autumn vs. Spring. The Duke is approaching Autumn and his son and Lilli are both in the throes of Spring—and ne'er the twain shall meet.

But all this is told in a comprehensive manner, with frequent moments of high humor and always the lyric poetry of which Fry is a master. In any other form it would be a most pedestrian effort.

Mediocrity might still crpep in without the incomparable efforts of Joan Haythorne, Claudia Morgan and Eileen Peel as the three mistresses; John Merivale as the son; John Williams as the estate manager, and Hurd Hatfield as the brother of Miss Palmer.

"VENUS OBSERVED"

Play by Christopher Fry; staged by Laurence Olivier; settings by Roger Furse; music by Herbert Menges; presented by the Theatre Guild, by arrangement with Mr. Olivier, at the Century Theatre, February 13, 1952. The cast:

Hereward.....Rex Harrison
Edgar.....John Merivale
Herbert Reedbeck.....John Williams
Capt. Fox Reddleman.....James Westerfield
Dominic.....Hurd Hatfield
Bates.....Stuart Burge
Rosabel Fleming.....Joan Haythorne
Jessie Dill.....Claudia Morgan
Hilda Taylor-Snell..Eileen Peel
Perpetua.....Lilli Palmer

There is also the fact that it was directed with unusual taste and ingenuity by Sir Laurence Olivier, who played the Harrison role in the original London Company; and that the English sets, designed by Roger Furse, were imported for the occasion.

You may not understand it all the time—but you'll like it.

New York Post

February 14, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Modern, Lyric World of Mr. Fry

The witty, graceful, perverse and enigmatic muse of Christopher Fry is to be found in its most uninhibited form in "Venus Observed," which the Theater Guild brought to the Century last night, with Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer in its leading roles. Never a man to say a thing simply when he can be devious and elliptical about it, or to use one word when fifteen or twenty will do, Mr. Fry is being particularly oblique in his phrasing and prodigal in his ideas and fancies in this poetic modern comedy about an aging romanticist's last love, and the result is at once eloquent, charming and curiously exasperating.

It is generally regarded as a major critical sin for a reviewer not to give a straightforward yes-or-no verdict on a play for his clients, but I might as well confess that you will be offered no such clear-cut judgment here. I found "Venus Observed" fascinating, slyly humorous, frequently beautiful, and often splendidly imaginative in its images and perceptions. It is clearly the work of a distinguished craftsman in words and phrases, and a man of refreshingly original turn of mind. But it is likewise frequently so oblique, verbose and studiously cryptic that it ceases to be anything but maddening in the theater.

Handicap of Size

Let me say at once in Mr. Fry's behalf that, despite the excellence of its acting and production, his play is currently being done under one great handicap. The Century Theater is much too big for it. "Venus Observed" is basically an intimate and quiet comedy. It depends for its effects on grace, ease and urbanity, and when its actors, as good as they are, have to shout and overemphasize their points to be understood through a vast auditorium, when they are forced to use mechanical aids to audibility, they and their play are placed under a strain that is far from helpful to the mood of the narrative.

Nevertheless, I don't mean to exonerate Mr. Fry entirely. To a certain extent, his perversity can be both charming and amusing, but there is a point when it becomes merely exasperating. He seems to forget that all playgoers don't attend his plays armed with the printed text. I think he might conciliate them just a trifle without harm to his creative integrity. Almost everything he has to say in "Venus Observed" is either charming or witty or beautiful. But his urbane lyricism often cascades forth so recklessly that, pay attention as you will, it is almost impossible not to lose track of him occasionally.

The Duke of Altair

The story is simple enough. The aging Duke of Altair, lover of astronomy and women, brings three of his ex-mistresses to his home with the intention of marrying one of them, but falls in love with the young daughter of his amiably dishonest secretary. In the end, the girl turns to his son, and the Duke has to be satisfied with one of the others. The plot, however, is not the author's chief interest. The style, the mood and the puckishness of his intellect are everything. It is my guess that the stage world of Christopher Fry belongs in costume, rather than in modern dress, but, verbally, it is an undeniably lovely one.

Laurence Olivier, who played it in London, has staged the comedy understandingly, and there is the great help of Roger Furse's handsome sets. Mr. Harrison acts the role of the Duke with skill and charm, and Miss Palmer is, as usual, delightful as the girl. John Williams, an unfailingly good actor, is particularly fine as the secretary, and the other players are consistently helpful. Particularly in this undistinguished season, "Venus Observed" is a play of undeniable quality. Much of it is a real joy. But Mr. Fry's gift for language has a disturbing way of entrapping him.

The New York Times

February 14, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In "Venus Observed," which opened at the Century last evening, Christopher Fry is in a pensive mood. He describes it as a play for autumn, as "The Lady's Not for Burning" was a play for spring. On the whole, spring is the more becoming season to a man who cascades words and phrases torrentially. There was a sense of impudent fun under the fantastic style of the spring play. Mr. Fry disarmed us all by poking fun at his own opulence and facility.

Although the style is antic in "Venus Observed," the mood is serious. This is a poetic play about lonely people reaching out for love, understanding or solace. Since Mr. Fry has a light heart as well as a reflective mind, most of the characters are gay. They include a rakish, amiable duke, who would like to settle down with a permanent wife; his son, who becomes his father's competitor; an amusingly articulate embezzler, who is devoted to the duke; the embezzler's daughter wondering about life, and several other interesting people.

* * *

Since Mr. Fry's heart is in the right place, they are ingratiating people whose cleverness is the least of their virtues. For they are compassionate folks; they understand and forgive each other. In order to give them something to do, Mr. Fry burns down the duke's lunar observatory at the close of the second act, and this does resolve Mr. Fry's thoughtful mood in the last act.

But "Venus Observed" is compounded chiefly of words arranged in poetic patterns. Some of the words are witty. Many of them are lovely. Mr. Fry is a richly gifted writer. With all proper respect for his quality, however, a theatregoer can hardly ignore the fact that "Venus Observed" is languid, coy, pretentious and frequently tedious. There is not enough genuine substance at the core of the play to support such an elaborate canopy.

Although Mr. Fry has set his actors a difficult problem, he has not defeated them. In fact, he has put Rex Harrison on his mettle. Mr. Harrison plays the part of the philandering duke with neatness and lucidity. You may not know what the duke is talking about a good half of the time. If Mr. Harrison doesn't know, you never will suspect it from his acting. He gives a winning performance as a highly civilized man of the world who is full of learning, good humor and pity. If the play were half so pertinent, it would be a masterpiece.

Lilli Palmer's part as the embezzler's daughter is more elusive, for Mr. Fry never seems to come to grips with it. But, as usual, Miss Palmer is beautiful and sincere, and lights up the stage whenever she sets foot on it. As the cheerful, garrulous, gentlemanly swindler, John Williams gives a particularly humorous and discerning performance—lightly but adroitly sketched by an expert craftsman.

In the parts of three of the duke's most admired mistresses, Joan Haythorne, Claudia Morgan and Eileen Peel bring a good deal of charm and wry amusement to the performance. As the duke's son, John Merivale gives his best performance up to the present; it is forceful and coherent. In the less chivalrous part of a pious meddler, Hurd Hatfield is excellent.

* * *

Although playing the two Cleopatra dramas ought to be exhausting enough for most mortals, Laurence Olivier has managed to stage "Venus Observed" simultaneously. He has taught his actors how to speak Mr. Fry's verse, which is an achievement; but physically the performance is at loose ends. It is full of extraneous motion. Roger Furse, the London designer, has provided two inviting sets—one for the observatory, and one for a summer house in an English park; and the costumes by Valentina and Mildred Trebor give the performance a smart appearance.

Nothing Mr. Fry writes is commonplace; and nothing in which Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer appear lacks luster and elegance. "Venus Observed" deserves the Theatre Guild cachet. But Mr. Fry's genius for words becomes old-fashioned prolixity when he is in a pensive mood. There is less drama than literature in his study for the autumn season of life.

Daily Mirror

February 14, 1952

'Venus Observed' Shapes Up as Stunning Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The Theatre Guild brought distinction to a season sorely in need of it with the presentation last evening of "Venus Observed" at the Century Theatre. This is the best play yet to come from the pen of England's wonder boy, Christopher Fry. It is a stunning play, notable for wit, keen observation and magnificent speech.

There is no one writing today with Fry's command of words. He has been accused on occasion, and rightly so, of verbosity and obscurantism. But in this instance, he has given us a reasonably well plotted and beautifully stated commentary on youth and age, life and love and other matters of moment.

An aging duke, a widower with a fondness for astronomy, decides that it is time he married again. He summons three former loves to the observatory on his estate so that his son may choose the right mother by bestowing upon his selection a symbolical apple. The son's choice, hating the competition of the stars, bungles her opportunity.

Just then, the daughter of the duke's estate manager returns from abroad, and both the duke and his son fall for her. She learns that her father has been embezzling the duke's funds, and agrees to meet the duke in his romantic observatory that night in an effort to gain leniency, even though it may mean a sacrifical marriage. Their tryst is interrupted by a fire, set by the mistress who loves the duke most.

When the blaze has been quenched, the duke generously releases the girl to his son and prepares to await the return from jail of the firebug who cared enough for him to burn down his observatory.

This fantasy has been staged with admirable skill by Laurence Olivier, who played the duke in England. Over here, Rex Harrison acts him with rare charm, humanity and understanding. Lilli Palmer (Mrs. Harrison off stage) is quite enchanting as the girl. She has one of the longest speeches on record, and brings it off triumphantly.

John Williams is perfect as the duke's errant manager. And there are outstanding performances by Joan Haythorne, Eileen Peel and Claudia Morgan, as the trio of mistresses. John Merivale, James Westerfield, Stuart Burge and Hurd Hatfield also make excellent contributions.

"Venus Observed" is a play that demands more than one hearing. And that is the test of a great play, or great music for that matter. You must have a keen ear, indeed, to catch all the beauties and implications of Fry's script at a single visit to the Century. And if you have such an ear, we think you will care to relish Fry's singing verse more than once.

The Theatre Guild has been in something of an eclipse since the season it startled us with "Oklahoma!" But it has regained its august position this year with the production of "Jane" and "Venus Observed." With these hits, it serves notice that it is still paramount. And that is as it should be.

The New York engagement of "Venus Observed" has, unfortunately, been limited to 16 weeks. We trust that Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn will extend the run. Otherwise, the many playgoers who have been waiting for such a fine play as "Venus Observed" may not have the chance to see it. And to see it is a must for all who love the theatre at its best.

New York Herald Tribune

February 14, 1952

"Venus Observed"

By WALTER F. KERR

THERE are two schools of thought about Christopher Fry: one which holds that this impudent and fanciful young comic poet has brought about a joyous rediscovery of the English language, and another which stubbornly holds that his verbal dexterity is mere vaudeville, and difficult vaudeville at that.

I am a Fry man myself, but I must confess that in "Venus Observed," which opened at the Century Wednesday night, the author is busy giving aid and comfort to the enemy. In the process of dazzling all the rest of us with the rare and rich antics through which he can put obedient words, Mr. Fry has bedazzled, and perhaps even blinded, himself. The language is once more put through hoops; but it finally tumbles in a little clutter about the feet of some paper-thin people whose behavior is sometimes amusing, sometimes ingratiating, but almost always uncomfortably contrived.

* * *

No one asks that a verse comedy, least of all the kind of fanciful conceit which Mr. Fry so pleasantly invents, be level-headed in its plotting or down-to-earth about its people. And we are, for the moment, quite willing to accept as heroine a young lady who has spent a few years in America destroying such public objects as have offended her esthetic sense. We are mildly entertained with the notion that she has put in some time in jail, making restitution. We are a little bewildered that she must suddenly draw a gun in a living-room and shoot an apple out of a young man's hand, but we expect that Fry will sooner or later have some delectable point to make of the episode. And it is pleasant to watch the Duke of Altair, an aging rake who